

**STATEMENT OF  
COMMISSIONER MEREDITH A. BAKER**

*Re: Rural Health Care Support Mechanism, WC Docket No. 02-60*

Of the many programs we manage, the Rural Health Care support mechanism is one where we can vividly see how it can have a real impact on the lives of consumers, in this case patients. It has already been instrumental in bringing state-of-the-art health care to remote areas where that was previously impossible. Many of us have been privileged to see first hand the way the Rural Health Care program has helped bridge critical health care gaps posed by unique geographic and economic challenges. My sense of how meaningful rural clinics are to their communities was shaped in large part by my visit to see the Bristol Bay Area Health Corporation in Alaska—a system that now serves 34 villages and relies on communications technologies to bring quality health services to the tribes of Bristol Bay.

Telemedicine, and networks to support it, will become even more important as all aspects of our lives, including health care, become increasingly dependent upon and integrated with the Internet. This program, however, has been significantly underutilized since its inception. The projected funding level of \$214 million for this year is well below the program's cap. I hope commenters in this proceeding will help us build on the work of the National Broadband Plan and draw on the lessons learned from the Pilot Program. We need to update the Rural Health Care program to ensure that all Americans have access to health care services and benefit from advances in medicine even if they live in rural and remote areas of the nation.

At the same time, I think it is prudent to move forward with reforms to this program under the existing \$400 million cap. I think it makes sense to figure out how to use the money allocated for this program better and more efficiently, with appropriate accountability measures, to achieve better outcomes for communities and patients without simply throwing more money at the problem.

I look forward to working on this with the Chairman and my fellow Commissioners in the months to come and I offer my thanks to the Bureau for your work on this item.